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THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

Fix state's Medicaid transportation system

Patients and taxpayers, deserve better than they're getting with this new system

This doesn't cut it when it comes to the state's new Medicaid transportation system: Patients dropped off for a doctor's appointment more than an hour late. Elderly and disabled people left outside waiting for their ride. Some patients left waiting for a ride that never comes.

"It's nothing short of a nightmare," Charles Mosteller of Travelers Rest said Monday at a hearing called in Greenville held by Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, head of the state Office on Aging.

"Patients are suffering," said Dr. Keith Guest, president of the American Medical Directors Association. "I'm concerned there will be worse outcomes and people will die," Guest was quoted as saying in a story by *Greenville News* health writer Liv Osby.

Medicaid patients who need this transport system to get to a doctor's appointment or dialysis deserve better. So do taxpayers who are funding South Carolina's system that grew from \$28.4 million in 2002 to \$42.8 million in 2006. Bauer said the price could grow by \$9 million to \$14 million under the new system designed to enhance accountability and efficiency.

So far, at least based on complaints from patients and providers, the new system has some serious problems. Good

news coming a day after Monday's hearing is this: the well-respected Legislative Audit Council will audit the Medicaid transportation system. "There is a lot of legislative interest, it involves lots of money, and it's a program that's been audited in other states and there have been problems found in other states," LAC director George Schroeder told Osby.

As Bauer has said, the new system represents a well-intentioned switch.

Under the old system, the state Department of Health and

STORYCHAT

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Human Services, the agency over the state's Medicaid program, contracted with county agencies, who in turn subcontracted with transportation companies to provide this non-emergency service, according to Osby's story. That system has been accused of high costs, fraud and abuse. The change put two "brokers" of transportation services in charge, and then they subcontract with local transportation companies. The new system in South Carolina is used in more than 20 oth-

er states.

Granted, any new system can have some startup problems. The new system started May 1. Problems such as the ones identified at Monday's hearing are unacceptable, and indeed could endanger Medicaid patients who depend on this transportation system for access to their medical care.

A challenge for South Carolina is that the companies were awarded contracts for five years. Bauer has it right when he said the system needs to be made better — or the state needs to find a way out of these contracts.

The independent audit should help state legislators put the complaints in perspective and more objectively evaluate how the new system is operating. The audit should be ready by the next legislative session.

Until then, Bauer's Office on Aging should keep the heat turned up on the providers running the Medicaid transportation system. Legislators shouldn't resist a little digging around, too, and Sen. Harvey Peeler's Senate Medical Affairs Committee held a public hearing Wednesday.

Elderly and disabled people in South Carolina who depend on this service should have adequate transportation and they should be treated with respect and compassion. This state should make sure that happens.

